DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 695 CS 211 709

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TITLE Writers Who Are Gay and Lesbian Adolescents: The Impact of Social Context.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989). Best copy available.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Environment; *Cultural Context; High Schools; *Homosexuality; Junior High Schools; *Student Attitudes; Student Subcultures; *Teacher Role; Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Homophobia

ABSTRACT

Teachers of writing are well trained to take the lead in inspiring a change in communication and behavior within the classroom to create more positive schooling experiences for gay and lesbian students. Many gay teenagers become aware of their sexuality at an early age; however, by the time most of them reach college composition, they have still not been able to use classroom writing as a vehicle for unraveling conflict or finding clarity about one of the most pressing issues in their lives. Writing teachers unknowingly inherit a minority group which has faced an adolescence marked by peer isolation, fear of harassment and violence, familial estrangement, and a lack of positive role models and resources. Teachers can take several steps to serve gay and lesbian students: (1) begin by assuming that not all their students are heterosexual; (2) actively work to eliminate name-calling and put-downs; and (3) work with curriculum committees and their unions to begin acknowledging gay students. (RS)

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"Writers who are Gay and Lesbian Adolescents: The Impact of Social Context" — by Leslie Smith

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My 7th grade writing classroom has just listened to excerpts from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream speech. I overhear Ben sharing in his response group. "I have a dream that there are no gay people. I dream that Brian would quit acting like a faggot." The other students laugh, nodding their heads in agreement.

During an Autobiography Unit, a student who has lesbian parents fails to turn in an entry about how his family is unique, claiming that he can't think of anything to write about.

Gay, lesbian and bisexual children under the age of 18 account for 600,000 of California's at risk youth. One-third will become chemically dependent. 100,000 will attempt suicide.

An acquaintance of mine recently did a double take when I mentioned something about gay and lesbian students at the junior high level. In fact, many gay teenagers become aware of their sexuality at an early age. Other students, gay or not, certainly feel the repurcussions of being perceived and treated as if they were gay by their classmates. By the time that most of these gay teenagers reach college composition, they have not yet been able to use classroom writing as a vehicle for unraveling conflict or finding clarity about one of, if not the most, pressing issues in their lives. Writing teachers unknowingly inherit a minority group which has faced an adolescence marked by peer isolation, fear of harassment and violence, familial estrangement and a lack of positive role models and resources. Since school writing occurs within a social

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context. homophobia which is a fear or hatred of same sex intimacy, also enters the classroom and pervades the language experience of all students. It is time for us as writing teachers and educators to face our responsibilities to gay and lesbian students.

At the middle and high school level where I teach, the peer group reigns supreme. The majority of my female students mousse their hair until it stands up vertically. There is practically a middle school uniform. When my students have to make a decision, rarely is there a tie vote. Everyone agrees to agree. A disgust for and hatred of homosexuals falls under this consential umbrella. Jokes about AIDS and Ben's hatefilled dream are part of the everyday banter at my school. So, gay students who happen to become aware of their sexuality at this grade level quickly realize that this difference is not tolerated by their peers. One response is to overcompensate by attempting to act "normal" and hide any signs of difference. Social workers Hunter and Schaefer, who are affiliated with New York State's Institute for the Protection of Gay and Lesbian Youth explain:

> The homosexual youth must lie or be singled out as different. Believing the myths and stereotypes about homosexuals, heterosexual youths often show little tolerance for this type of difference. They will make fun of and reject the lesbian or gay youth. If the young homosexual cannot conform to the group's identity and mores, then that youngster is isolated. Rejection by one's peer

group is difficult to handle, and most young people lack the coping skills to handle it.

To avoid this rejection, gay students try to blend in and carefully monitor self-disclosure. In my classroom, a transfer student who was gay switched schools in order to take on a new identity and avoid further peer harassment. When I saw him at a gay event without his new just for show girlfriend, he begged me to not spill his secret, so thoroughly self-absorbed was he, that he failed to note my vulnerability.

For students attempting to hide their identity, the writing classroom is both scary and frustrating. Response groups, personal experience writing and the sense of trust and community upon which successful writing programs are based, undermine the boundaries necessary for a gay adolescent's survival. Gay students may develop a distrust for the writing process, no matter how it is implemented, when they are unable to utilize it to tell their stories. I have found that in the writing classroom where self-exploration and exposure are the norm, that the initial voice of gay and lesbian students is covert, subtle and implied. I was not surprised when a young lesbian slipped a group of stories based on a matriarchal, female only cat kingdom onto my desk: At this point in her development as both a writer and a lesbian, fantasy was the only viable option.

Other gay and lesbian adolescents are unable to hide their sexuality. For them, harassment and gay bashing is a very real problem which extends beyond the classroom, onto the playground asphalt and into the lockeroom. Paul Gibson, a San Francisco psychotherapist who has worked with more than 300 gay teenagers has observed in his study on Suicide Among Gay and Lesbian Youth, "School can literally become a fearful place." Social workers Hunter and Schaecher elaborate

> Disapproval of homosexuality has so permeated society that violence against lesbian and gay people has become a norm. Violence against minorities is endemic in our society, and in recent years the violence toward lesbians and gays has increased dramatically.

In a recent survey of adult lesbians and gay men by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, of the 2074 respondents,

> one fifth of the females and nearly half of the males say they were harassed, threatened with violence, or physically assaulted in high school or junior high because they were perceived to be lesbian or gay.

Gay students lack resources and coping mechanisms to live with this situation. One difference between sexual orientation and other traits which determine minority status, is that gay people are often not welcomed or accepted by their families. Often, gay adolescents may not even find sanctuary at home from the pressures experienced at school: they may become run-aways and drop-outs . The Triangle Project of Los Angeles, an organization dedicated

to creating foster homes for gay and lesbian youth has found that the incidence of gay and lesbian youths living on the streets is three to four times higher than that of heterosexual youth.

These students also cannot draw upon the advice and experience of adult gay and lesbian role models. For example, the majority of gay and lesbian public school teachers are unable to "come out" at work due to a lack of community support and legal protection. In my network of over 35 elementary and secondary gay and lesbian teachers, not one is out to the entire school staff and student body. My support for the young lesbian who wrote about cats developed after she realized that I was not married. One day afterschool, this eleven year old emphatically declared, "I am just like you. I am never going to get married because I want to travel around the world and become a veterinarian. And, I am never going to like boys."

Yet, as I observed in "What's A Lesbian Teacher To Do?" which was published in the anthology <u>The Lesbian in Front of the Classroom: Writings by Lesbian Teachers</u>, the assistance I can provide as a lesbian teacher for gay students is actually quite limited:

> So if I were to stand up as an ally for gay people, that very act would be subject to scrutiny. As a "real" lesbian, I would only be pretending to be an ally. Since I lack the requisite cover, the risk is too great. I am caught in a viscious circle. Here I am, a happy, healthy and competent person, who also happens to be a lesbian, and I cannot present to my students

> a real example of who lesbians are. Since they don't realize that they know healthy lesbians, because many of us are forced to be closeted, they grow up thinking that they've never known any of us. Gay and lesbian students are missing out on some vital support.

Not surprisingly, most gay teenagers who are cognizant of their sexuality and unable to pass consider suicide: an alarming number of those who try, succeed. According to a federally funded study by Psychotherapist Gibson, the rate of suicide attempts among gay adolescents is three times higher than that among other teens. Gay teens are desparate for support and understanding. Gibson concludes:

> "The root of the problem of gay youth suicide is a society that discriminates against and stigmatizes homosexuals, while failing to recognize a lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation in large numbers of its young people. We must offer gay youth hope for the future and vision of a better life as a lesbian or gay male adult."

In facing our responsibility to this 10% of the student population, there are small and larger steps to take. First of all, a teacher should begin by assuming that not all of his/her students are heterosexual. Just this simple change in perspective could alter the heterosexist examples, analogies and metaphors used in many classrooms.

Secondly, teachers can actively work to eliminate namecalling and put-downs. In the article "What Do We Say When We Hear Faggot?" published in The Interracial Books for Children Council Bulletin, Leonore Gordon explains why this work will benefit all students.

> "Homophobic name calling is devestating to young people experiencing homosexual feelings. For

> youngsters who are not gay. Such name-calling creates or reinforces hostility towards the gay and lesbian population. And it forces all children to follow strict sex-role behaviors to avoid ridicule. Because homosexuality is such a charged issue, teachers rarely confront children who use homophobic name calling to humiliate and infuriate other children. Many teachers do not realize that this sort of name-calling can be dealt with in much the same way as other kinds of bigotry and stereotyping."

In addition to this direct confrontation of harassment, at a district level, teachers can work within curriculum committees and their Unions to begin acknowledging gay students. This is already starting to happen. The California State Board of Education recently decided to explicitly mention discrimination against gays and lesbians in its Model Curriculum on Human Rights and Genocide, after vigorous lobbying by concerned educators. Additionally, the California State Department of Education has created a Suicide Prevention Program that identifies gay and lesbian youth as being at risk. Furthermore, this past summer the National Education Association adopted a resolution addressing students' sexual orientation which states

> The National Education Association believes that all persons, regardless of sexual orientation, should be afforded equal opportunity within the public education system. The Association further believes that every school district should provide counseling for students who are struggling with their sexual/gender orientation.

I have been most encouraged by the Los Angeles Unified School District's leadership in moving beyond the individual classroom to develop a comprehensive model for meeting the needs of gay and lesbian adolescents. Project 10, named for the 10% of the student population which is gay or lesbian,

is a counseling program that offers emotional support, information, resources and referrals for young people who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and are in need of accurate information. Project 10 includes on-going training and sensitization of school staff, a "safe" place where students can come in to read or talk and a 24 hour hot-line whereby students can be put in touch with peer counselors specially trained in gay and lesbian issues. Teacher Virginia Uribe began Project 10 in 1984 at Fairfax High School after one boy felt so harrassed that he transferred and eventually dropped out.

Project 10's informational literature enumerates several priorities for addressing the needs of gay and lesbian students including:

*Break through the wall of silence that surrounds the subject of homosexuality in order to reach the targeted group.

*Provide campuses that are free of physical violence and verbal abuse toward sexual minorities.

*Reverse the trend of low self-esteem by presenting educational images and role models that are positive in nature.

*Allow the general student population access to information through the counseling system, curriculum incorporations and the school library.

Unfortunately, this exemplary program faces ongoing scrutiny and criticism. Reverend Lou Sheldon's "Traditional Values Coalition", which is part of a national campaign entitled "Stop Homosexual Advocacy in Public Education" (SHAPE) has tried unsucessfully to pass

legislation in the California State Assembly outlawing programs like Project 10. Implying that the Los Angeles Unified School District is recruiting students into the "gay lifestyle", as well as causing AIDS, the Traditional Values Coalition claims, "We have fired the first round or open warfare...to stop (homosexuality) before it spreads throughout the nation like cancer."

Recently, the Traditional Values Coalition was forced to withdraw homophobic legislation from consideration by the Assembly due to an outpouring of opposition by concerned educators. Programs like Project 10, which was initiated by one sensitive teacher, make me feel more hopeful about the future of gay and lesbian students in the writing classroom. As Project 10 founder Virginia Uribe states, "These kids are driven out of school by harassment. And the schools perpetuate the harassment by allowing it and by not having counseling for gays. We can interrupt that cycle, and it doesn't even have to cost a lot of money. We're talking about a shift in attitude." I share Ms. Uribe's optimism, and agree that counseling for all students as well as a change in attitude would create more positive schooling experiences for gay and lesbian students. Yet, I would like to add, that educators, and particularly teachers of writing are well trained as to take the lead in inspiring a change in communication and behavior within our classrooms.